



# The Arab Uprisings and Social Rights: Asian Migrant Workers in Lebanon

Elizabeth Picard

## ► To cite this version:

Elizabeth Picard. The Arab Uprisings and Social Rights: Asian Migrant Workers in Lebanon. 2013.  
halshs-00938259

**HAL Id: halshs-00938259**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00938259>**

Preprint submitted on 29 Jan 2014

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Elizabeth Picard  
Institut de Recherches et d'Études sur le Monde Arabe et Musulman  
Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique  
Aix-en-Provence, France

#### THE ARAB UPRISINGS AND SOCIAL RIGHTS

#### ASIAN MIGRANT WORKERS IN LEBANON

Middle East revolutions of the 2010s against authoritarianism and corruption were quickly labelled part of the “struggle for democracy.” While the term was used in vague and often contradictory manners by opponents of the incumbent regimes, street protesters and foreign supporters, its implications are manifold. As explained by T. H. Marshall in 1950, the struggle for democracy implies fighting for three sorts of rights: political rights, civil rights and social rights.<sup>1</sup> In the Middle East, ideas of citizenship and equality before the law are more often than not challenged because of overwhelming social and economic inequalities. Among the citizens of a state and among the inhabitants of a country, who is entitled to social welfare, health and education? How do the inequalities of access to these rights interfere with the respect of political and civil rights? How do they contribute to representations of the self as a citizen, of the citizens as a nation, of the state as a common good?

---

<sup>1</sup> As reminded by Anh Nga Longva, “Citizenship in the Gulf State. Conceptualization and Practice”, in Nils August Butenschøn, Uri Davis, Manuel Sarkis Hassassian (eds), 2000, *Citizenship and the state in the Middle East: Approaches and Applications*, New York: Syracuse University Press, p. 184, quoting T. H. Marshall, 1950, *Citizenship and Social Class*, Cambridge University Press.

Such questions appear obvious in several Gulf States where foreign workers have long brought a crucial contribution to economic growth while remaining excluded from national rights and wealth. By contrast, they remained understudied in the Arab Levant until recently. Still, the labour market in Lebanon can be considered quite similar to the labour markets in Kuwait or Bahrain; the economy of Lebanon can be considered a rent economy comparable to those of the Gulf States; and the legal status and practical treatment of foreign workers in Lebanon obey the same rules known in the Gulf as *kafala* (sponsorship). Moreover, in Lebanon, like in the Gulf States, the foreign workers' issue underlines flaws in national building and contributes to the fragmentation of domestic ethnic and confessional groups. Lebanon has often been labelled a 'microcosm' of the Middle East, a place to study events and trends which would soon spread in the Arab East. In this time of social upheaval and political change in the Arab world, the case of Lebanon and the current situation of Asian migrant workers in Lebanon might offer an insight into the future of the Gulf states.

An often heard self-satisfied comment on the Uprisings in the surrounding Arab countries is either that Lebanon, having long been a paragon of democracy did not need a revolution like its neighbors or, alternatively, that it was the first nation in the Arab world to lead a successful popular *intifadha* in the Spring of 2005, which obtained the rapid withdrawal of the Syrian occupation forces.

Eight years later this optimistic judgment remains questionable: notwithstanding the dramatic episodes of the summers of 2006 (the Israeli war over Lebanon) and 2007 (the army war against an Islamist insurgency in Nahr al-Barid), the local political scene is characterized by a toxic stalemate between two rival coalitions: the "8 March" parties dominated by Hezbollah and supported by Syria and Iran; and the "14 March" forces under the leadership of the Hariri's Future Party which is allied with the Saudis and the West. Since 2005, expectations for constitutional reform and public accountability have diminished year by year, and street politics have turned more violent every year.

Yet, the Arab Uprisings, especially the demonstrations in Tahrir square in Cairo and the mobilizations in Syria have resounded in civil society associations in Lebanon as well as among militant organizations. "Here [in Lebanon], it was heard, we don't suffer from one dictator but from eighteen [in reference to the leaders of legally empowered confessional

groups].”<sup>2</sup> Calls for constitutional reform, the suppression of the sectarian system and reining in its ruling elite mobilized more than 3,000 people on 27 February 2011, 10,000 and 25,000 people on 6 and March 20, in rallies called respectively by Leftist, democratic secular collectives, independent activists and political parties such as the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP) and the People’s Movement.<sup>3</sup> It was the birth of several campaigns and gatherings outside the 14 and 8 March polarisation and the classical left. Civil movements were mainly motivated by the inability of Lebanon’s ruling class to deliver structural reform. The movements acquired new layers of activists around the country, such as the *Haqqi ‘alayyi* (‘my right’) campaign in Beirut, the ‘Tripoli without arms campaign’, the ‘Civil Forum’ in the Biqaa, and the *‘Amal mubashar* (‘Direct Action’), a coalition of independent activists in Beirut, the Biqaa and the Shuf. However contradictions soon started to surface, as radical groups argued that a more revolutionary movement was needed to continue the battle to bring down the whole system. Political parties from both 14 and 8 March also tried to hijack the movement and, finally, the revolt against the regime in Syria added a new problem: whether or not to support it? As the deadline for organising quadrennial legislative elections approached, controversies over the Electoral law stiffened, showing the underlying fragmentation and paralysis of the political class. Distrust and despair delegitimized the political arena.

The capacity for political mobilization and the long history of political engagement noticed by social scientists<sup>4</sup> seemed to have run out of steam after the national elections in 2009. In contrast, one could observe a steady increase in the voicing and actions of labour unions and civil society organisations in defence of labourers and employees, protesting against low salaries, unemployment, the lack of health coverage, the rising cost of basic commodities and the deterioration of working conditions. Beyond the negative effects of the deepening political crisis and financial uncertainty, social conditions have steadily deteriorated over the

---

<sup>2</sup> For a reflection on authoritarianism in post-war Lebanon see Farid El-Khazen, 2003, “The Postwar Political Process: Authoritarianism by Diffusion”, in T. Hanf, N. Salam (eds.), *Lebanon in Limbo. Postwar Society and State in an Uncertain Regional Environment*, Baden-Baden, Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, p. 53-74.

<sup>3</sup> Marie-Noëlle AbiYaghi, 2012, « Civil Mobilisation and Peace in Lebanon,” <http://www.c-r.org/accord-article/civil-mobilisation-and-peace-lebanon> accessed 25 January 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Karam Karam, 2009, “An Analysis of Political Change in Lebanon in the Light of Recent Mobilization Cycles”, in Laura Guazzone, Daniela Pioppi (eds.), *The Arab State and Neo-liberal Globalization. The Restructuring of State Power in the Middle East*, Reading, Ithaca Press, pp. 47-73.

past half-decade while the Lebanese were enduring the consequences of the world economic crisis and the Arab Uprisings.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, social mobilisation, which had long remained contained by the confessional political leadership, hit the headlines in spite of the low level of unionisation.<sup>6</sup> In the early 2010s, “signs of life in various labour movements” suggested that “Lebanon’s stillborn revolution” might lead up to a substitution of social mobilization for the aborted political struggle.<sup>7</sup> Electricity contract workers carried out the longest workers’ uprising in Lebanon’s modern history; public school teachers and the Union Coordination Committee representing teachers, professors, and public administration staff and retirees, led weeks of strike and protest; workers and employees in the Spinneys supermarkets announced the much publicised and widely supported creation of a new union; Beirut municipality employees, soon followed by their co-workers in Beiteddine and Tripoli, demonstrated in the streets; the bank employees’ association took escalatory steps to bring the banks association to agree to renew their collective labour agreement, etc.<sup>8</sup> Indeed labour and unionism issues became subjects of mass contest as in the other Arab Uprisings.<sup>9</sup>

This trend could be noticed parallel to another one on the Lebanese scene: mobilizations in favour of foreign workers. While human rights associations proliferated in the wake of the civil war,<sup>10</sup> the Syrian withdrawal in 2005 gave them a new boost, especially for advocacy groups such as *Ruwwad* (2004) which cares for imprisoned refugees and illegal migrants, *Kafa* (2005) which opened a branch devoted to migrant workers in 2010, or *al-Mufakkira al-Qanuniyya* (“the Legal Agenda”) founded in 2009 by the well-known lawyer Nizar Saghiyeh.

---

<sup>5</sup> With a national debt up to 58 MM\$, no government budget approved since 2006 and a slowing down of growth from 5% to 1.5% in 2012. See [http://www.lcps-lebanon.org/publications/1345209118-economic\\_challenges.pdf](http://www.lcps-lebanon.org/publications/1345209118-economic_challenges.pdf) accessed 25 January 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Only 5 percent of employees and workers adhere to a union according to Mohammad Zbeeb, 28 December 2012, “Bid Farewell to a Lebanese Union Impostor”, *al-Akhbar* English edition.

<sup>7</sup> Rasha Abouzaki, 18 July 2012, “Lebanon’s stillborn Revolution,” *al-Akhbar* English edition.

<sup>8</sup> These are the most publicised social mobilisation documented and discussed in the daily *al-Akhbar* since April 2012 by journalists from the economic and social desk Rasha Abouzaki, Hassan Chakrani, Faten Elhajj, Mouhamad Wehbe, Mohammad Zbeeb and others.

<sup>9</sup> Marie Duboc, 2013, « La question syndicale comme objet contestataire », in Amin Allal, Thomas Pierret (drs.), *Au coeur de révoltes arabes. Devenir révolutionnaires*, Paris, Armand Colin.

<sup>10</sup> Karam Karam, 2006, *Le Mouvement Civil au Liban. Mobilisations, protestations et revendications associatives dans l'après-guerre*, Paris, Karthala.

In Lebanon, dozens of such associations<sup>11</sup> are working along confessional charity NGOs such as *Caritas* in support of foreign workers, endeavouring to solve judicial and security issues, defend their rights and alleviate their harsh daily life. They are organised and powerful, make an intensive use of the Internet, and mobilize volunteers and local and international donors. An important novelty of the 2010s is that after long restricting their interest to (extremely ill-treated) female domestic workers<sup>12</sup> these NGOs and associations have become aware of the precarious situation of thousands of '*ummal wafidin*'<sup>13</sup> working in construction, agriculture and factories. Although the foreign workers may not play an active role themselves, the associations go public and voice complaints and demands that echo those of Lebanese workers.

In 2011, World Bank estimates put the total workforce in Lebanon at 1.2 million (for a population of around 4.2 million) of whom some 760,000 were foreigners (17.8 percent of the population, around 50 percent of the workforce). Direct observation and government statistics, however faulty they may be,<sup>14</sup> and rough comparisons between figures from the Central Administration of Statistics for 1998 quoted by Young (p. 6) and the 2010 estimate by the Pastoral Care of Afro-Asian Migrant Workers (PCAAM) quoted in the 2011 CARIM Report,<sup>15</sup> all show a sharp increase in foreign manpower, and a particular growth in Asian labour immigration as well as a new and important African immigration in contrast to the global decrease of Arab manpower.

#### **Breakdown of official foreign labour in Lebanon (excluding Syrian & Palestinian)**

---

<sup>11</sup> Lebanon Support, *Daleel Madani. Civil Society Portal*. See <http://daleel-madani.org> accessed 25 January 2014.

<sup>12</sup> A choice, one of my interviewees argued, 'dictated by the feminists, Secretary of State Clinton and US funding.'

<sup>13</sup> Arabic translation for foreign worker.

<sup>14</sup> Studies on the workforce in Lebanon stress the difficulty of access to up to date, reliable and significant data on the recruitment and employment of foreign temporary workers (Sensenig-Dabbous, Hourani, *op.cit.* p. 2) mainly due to the inability/reluctance of the Lebanese state to publish useful statistics. Most of my interviewees and written sources suggested that official figures have to be multiplied by three in order to report the real number of foreign workers. According to unofficial estimates, the Ministry of Labour delivered 185,000 work permits in 2011 (this figure does not include permits for Palestinians or Syrians) – of which 45,000 were for non-domestic jobs.

<sup>15</sup> Martin J. Mc Dermott, 2010, *Report of the Committee on Pastoral Care of Afro-Asian Migrant (PCAAM) workers in Lebanon to its president Bishop Elias Nassar*, quoted in Sensenig, Hourani, p. 39.

	1998	2010
Arabs	23,854	18,755
Non-Arab Asians	42,042	76,645
Africans		46,812

Observation of these new trends in the context of diverse but significant Arab revolts led me to propose a hypothesis on the current mobilizations in Lebanon. In line with comments by specialists on migration in the Middle East who suggested that “there is a thread linking protest and international migration,”<sup>16</sup> I proposed to make this thread visible and relevant to understand the new developments on the social scene in Lebanon. Namely, I noticed that the minister of Labour in the “8 March” Miqati government formed in June 2011, Charbel Nahas, put together a reform package to ensure the periodic adjustment of wages, to redistribute revenue from rentier to productive services, to reinvigorate the role of the unions and to create the basis for universal health care in Lebanon. Among other things, Nahas argued in favour of respecting international norms relating to the treatment of migrant workers.<sup>17</sup> He advocated extension of the minimum wage rule to foreign workers “not for humanitarian reasons but in order to boost the labour market.”<sup>18</sup> Although new in Lebanon, such a discourse appeared to fit the “global legalist narrative” of equality, secularism and the rule of law developed by transnational forces in accordance with the policies of the great powers.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Philippe Fargues, 2011, “Voice after Exit: Revolution and Migration in the Arab World”, *Migration Information Source*, <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?ID=839> accessed 25 January 2014. Before discussing Arab *emigration* toward Europe, Fargues mentions migration processes in the Arab lands *generally*.

<sup>17</sup> Intervention in a closed seminar on migrant labour, Institut Français du Proche-Orient, 3 November 2012. The Lebanese authorities have been reluctant to ratify international agreements on migrant workers such as the ILO conventions of 1949 and 1955, and the 1990 Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant workers and members of their Families. Eugene Sensenig-Dabbous, Guita Hourani, 2011, “Towards Effective Temporary Labor Migration Schemes Report on Lebanon and Jordan”, *CARIM* (Consortium for Applied Research on International Migration) *Research Report* 2001-08, <http://hdl.handle.net/1814/19882> accessed 25 January 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Azfar Khan, senior migration specialist, International Labour Organization, Regional Office for Arab States, Beirut. Interview, 9 November 2012.

<sup>19</sup> David Mednicoff, 2012, “The Legal Regulation of Migrant Workers, Politics and Identity in Qatar and the UAE”, in Mehran Kamrava, Zahra Babar (eds.), *Migrant Labor in the Persian Gulf*, New-York, Columbia/Hurst, pp.187-215.

Following the theory of migrations and trans-nationalism inspired by Wallerstein,<sup>20</sup> it is tempting to see the democratization discourse currently spreading over the Middle East impact on the integration of migrant workers in the receiving countries and boost trans-border social networks. In the case of Lebanon, such promotion of democracy would result in empowering the migrants, especially the non-qualified migrants, and reducing the local competitiveness of their low salaries. My central hypothesis was that the social scene might witness a strategic bridging between Lebanese workers and their unions on the one hand, and foreign workers and their associations on the other in order to promote social measures to their common benefit. In other words, if there was to be a “revolution” in Lebanon, it would be primarily through the spill-over of a social movement across national boundaries, by means of the de-sectorisation of contentious politics and the concerted collective action of activists who, until then, have rarely cooperated in their struggle against economic and political domination. In view of the paralysis of the political sphere, and taking advantage of the “conjunctural fluidity of social relations,” the unskilled Lebanese labourers and the exploited migrant workers would be able to jointly “mobilize their resources” beyond their conflictual sectoral goals in order to lead the country on the path of transition.<sup>21</sup>

Field research to test this hypothesis was conducted during two fifteen days visits in Lebanon, in November 2012 and March 2013. I interviewed stakeholders such as union members and leaders in GCLW (General Confederation of Lebanese Workers) and FENASOL (Federation of Workers and Employees Unions in Lebanon, a split from GCLW), government authorities in the Security Directorate and an ex-minister of Labour. I met ILO (International Labour Organization) specialists such as Azfar Khan and Mustafa Said. I visited civil society organisations devoted to the support of migrant workers: Frontiers (Ruwad), Lebanese Labour Watch (al-Marsad al-Lubnani li-Huquq al-‘Ummal wal-Muwadhdhafin), Arcenciel and Caritas-Lebanon. I corresponded with executives in labour import companies and members of the *AliBaba* network. I discussed with analysts such as Elisabeth Longuenesse (IFPO), Paul

---

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Castles, Mark Miller, 2003, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, New York, The Guilford Press. Castles’ hypotheses have been deconstructed for the Gulf monarchies by Claire Beaugrand, 2010, “Politiques de non-intégration dans les monarchies du Golfe. Discuter les raisons de leur pérennité,” *Transcontinentales* 8/9, <http://transcontinentales.revues.org/793> accessed 25 January 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Michel Dobry, 1986, *Sociologie des crises politiques. La dynamique des mobilisations multisectorielles*, Paris, Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques.



Tabar, director of LAU (Lebanese American University) Institute of Migration Studies, Assaf Dahdah, a PhD student in anthropology at Université de Provence and Karam Karam (Common Space Initiative for Share Knowledge and Consensus Building)

I was given the opportunity to present my preliminary hypothesis in a seminar at IFPO (3 November 2012). Participants unanimously stressed that no real de-sectorisation was taking place in Lebanon, although the rise in activism and protest I had noticed was beyond question. While they did not dismiss the possibility that social mobilisation could successfully substitute for political activism in the current deadlock, they concurred in doubting whether it would be possible to build a bridge between national and foreign claims, and establish cooperation between the two labour sectors. Contacts, interviews and readings, namely of Michael Young's report<sup>22</sup> and Mary Kavar's studies,<sup>23</sup> only confirmed these early answers. The second seminar on Foreign Workers in Lebanon organised by Elisabeth Longuenesse at IFPO (20 March 2013) brought further confirmation with additional comments and elements of comprehension.

Yet, my curiosity remained and my early hypothesis morphed into a new series of questions: which elements, which dynamics and conditions explain the current situation of the labour market in Lebanon and the endurance of the boundaries between the various categories of exploited labour? Should we look into the Lebanese polity or into transnational labour networks to understand the current situation? How do the national and the international dimensions meet and connect, around which crucial matters, through the mediation of which actors? And what could be the consequences of such structure for migrant workers in Lebanon and for the Lebanese social fabric?

Reflecting upon these questions and examining the documentation collected during fieldwork led to three complementary tracks of analysis: the political economy of *globalization without liberalization* in countries such as Lebanon requires that the labour market remains split into competing segments; while workers from these various segments are stuck in a common no-win situation, agents all along the trans-boundary migratory

---

<sup>22</sup> Michael Young, 1999, *Migrant Workers in Lebanon*, Beirut, The Lebanese NGO forum, <http://www.lnf.org.lb/migrationnetwork/mig3.html> accessed 25 January 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Mary Kavar is an ILO researcher working on issues related to skills and employability, employment policy, youth employment and migration in the Arab East. Mary Kavar, Zafiris Tzannatos, 2012, "Private Sector Does not Demand Enough Skilled Labor", *LCPS Policy Brief*, <http://www.lcps-lebanon.org/publication.php?id=260> accessed 25 January 2014.

networks cooperate to their mutual benefit. Therefore, social dynamics and power hierarchies have to be assessed on a *transnational basis* taking into account the strength of social networks; the changing ethnoscape and social dynamics within Lebanon's boundaries contribute to *weaken the national narrative of the sovereign state* if not its very existence.

### **Globalization without liberalization and the split labour market**

Long before the neoliberalism of the Hariri era<sup>24</sup> Lebanon was the Middle Eastern paragon of a globalized merchant and financial economy.<sup>25</sup> Yet, before independence, and more than ever after the civil war, the globalization of the Lebanese "free-market" economy did not mean liberalization but rather the domination of powerful private interests. It did not imply the respect of fair competition and the rule of law by capital owners but rather their monopolization of wealth and the clientelization of the polity and society.<sup>26</sup>

This monopolistic logic prevailed as far as immigration and labour rights were concerned. The current situation of Lebanese legislation, carefully monitored by the ruling elite, is telling. The national strategy for inward migration remains extremely cautious and the regulatory frameworks dealing with migrant workers can be considered "poor and based on continuously changing policies."<sup>27</sup> As mentioned in note 15, Lebanon has not ratified the ILO conventions of 1949, 1955, the 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1990 convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers. Given the large influx of Palestinian refugees on its territory after the 1948-9 war, and given the unruly participation of hundreds of thousands of Syrian workers in its economy, it is understood that Lebanon will probably not ratify these instruments.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Hannes Baumann, 2012, "The 'new contractor bourgeoisie' in Lebanese politics: Hariri, Miqati and Faris" in A. Knudsen, M. Kerr (eds.), *Lebanon after the Cedar Revolution*, London: Hurst, pp. 125-44.

<sup>25</sup> Carolyn Gates, 1998, *The Merchant Republic of Lebanon: Rise of a Open Economy*, London, I. B. Tauris.

<sup>26</sup> Reinoud Leenders, 2012, *Spoils of Truce: Corruption and State Building in Post-war Lebanon*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press.

<sup>27</sup> The key governmental agencies managing the issue of migrant labour are the general security in the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Social Affairs. Sensenig-Dabbous, Hourani, 2011, *op. cit.*, II.A. Lebanese Government Level, pp. 30-4.

<sup>28</sup> Lebanon currently excludes signing ILO conventions C118 on Equality of Treatment of Nationals and non-Nationals in Social Security, C97 on Migration for Employment and C143 on Migrations in Abusive Conditions and the Promotion of Equality of Opportunity and Treatment of Migrant Workers. Yet, it ratified the Palermo Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons,

The resulting informality of the migrant work market fits into the general handling of labour issues in Lebanon. According to a 2011 World Bank report, “only 29 percent of Lebanese workers earn formal regular wages, the remainder being either informally employed, or self-employed, or unemployed”.<sup>29</sup> It is commonly agreed that this percentage is greater among the 60 percent of foreign workers, a large proportion of whom have entered Lebanon surreptitiously and illegally through the Syrian border or stayed in the country after expiration of their contract and visa.

Consequently, two main features characterize the foreign labour market in Lebanon: it is a split market, and an informal market organised/disorganised for the optimal exploitation of human work force.

Taking advantage of the participation of tens of thousands of skilled and unskilled Palestinian refugees in the 1950s and 1960s in a buoyant national economy while denying them the right to national integration (*tawtin*) provided an early model of disconnected policies for the business community’s handling of foreign workers: “restrictions on the Palestinians’ right to work lead to exploitative conditions but do not shut them out of the labour market.”<sup>30</sup>

The Syrian exception in terms of labour legislation reinforced its segmentation. The Syrian pattern of migration and its relationship to the labour market and Lebanese society at large differs from those of other Arab migrants such as the Egyptians and Sudanese. Already in the 1970s, Syrian workers were more numerous than the Palestinians and easier to employ and dismiss. Affirming a long agreed bilateral policy (1949, 1972) renewed in the 1994 Labour Agreement (following the 1991 Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation, and Coordination), workers get a three month visa every time they show up at the border and are not required to have a work permit or a sponsor (*kafil*). However, the long political and military involvement of the Ba’thist regime in Lebanon during and after the civil war made,

---

and Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, of 2000. A. Di Bartolomeo, T. Fakhoury, D. Perrin, 2011, “Lebanon, The Demographic-Economic Framework of Migration, The Legal Framework of Migration, The Socio-Political Framework of Migration,” *CARIM migration profile*, [http://www.carim.org/public/migrationprofiles/MP\\_Lebanon\\_EN.pdf](http://www.carim.org/public/migrationprofiles/MP_Lebanon_EN.pdf) accessed 25 January 2014.

<sup>29</sup> Mohammad Zbeeb, “Bid farewell to a Lebanese Union impostor,” *al-Akhbar* English, 28 December 2012.

<sup>30</sup> ILO, 2012, *Palestinians in Lebanon working but under precarious conditions*, [http://www.ilo.org/beirut/media-centre/news/WCMS\\_BEY\\_PR\\_10\\_EN/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/beirut/media-centre/news/WCMS_BEY_PR_10_EN/lang--en/index.htm) accessed 25 January 2014.

and still makes, their case politically sensitive.<sup>31</sup> Their number diminished drastically after the military withdrawal in 2005 but grew again dramatically when thousands of refugees fled their country in turmoil since 2011.<sup>32</sup> Beyond a hostile social discourse expressed across all confessional groups, they offer a ductile variation margin for the business community, not dissimilar to the role played by Pakistani Sunnis and Indian migrant workers in Gulf States such as Bahrain.<sup>33</sup>

Following the Palestinian and Syrian patterns, national and even ethnic differentiation prevailed. The legal and factual differentiation between nationals and foreigners, Arabs and non-Arabs, and between various non-Arab nationalities was due to the employers' approach of splitting the market in order to take advantage of differences between native, unionized workers and undocumented immigrant, non-unionized workers from poorer countries.<sup>34</sup> In 1971 for example, *Ittihad 'Ummal Balidiyyat Bayrut* represented mainly southern Lebanese municipality toilers; in the immediate after-war Oger Liban carried on recruiting mainly Lebanese for the reconstruction and the street cleaning of downtown Beirut. However, progressively in the 1990s, Palestinian and Syrian manpower, then non-Arab migrants took over from Lebanese from the peripheral regions in these tasks and other unskilled jobs all over the country: in the construction sector and menial jobs in the agricultural and service sectors such as gas station attendants, janitors, cleaners, porters or sanitary workers, etc.<sup>35</sup> Year after year, capitalists and managers chose to recruit in foreign countries with lower standards of living in search of lower wage demands: Egyptians then Sudanese were "imported" in large numbers as well as Philipinos, then Sri Lankans and other Asians nationalities.

---

<sup>31</sup> John Chalcraft, 2009, *The Invisible cage. Syrian Migrant Workers in Lebanon*, Stanford, Stanford University Press.

<sup>32</sup> "Anti-Syrian tide drives workers out of Lebanon," *The New York Times*, March 4, 2005 ; Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2009, *Lebanon and Syria: Situation of Syrians in Lebanon; violence against Syrians; political affiliation of Syrians; naturalization of Syrians in 1994 (1994-2009)*, ZZZ103296.E, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4b7cee9023.html> accessed 25 January 2014; Fabrice Balanche, "al-'Ummal al-Suriyyun fi Lubnan, *Le Monde Diplomatique* Arabic Edition, March 2007; Ahmed Mohsen, "Syrian Workers Eyed with Suspicion after Uprising," *al-Akhbar* English version, 5 December 2011.

<sup>33</sup> Laurence Louër, 2008, "The political impact of labour migration in Bahrain," *City & Society* 20 (1), pp. 32–53,

<sup>34</sup> Edna Bonacich, 1972, « A theory of ethnic antagonism: the split labor market », *American Sociological Review* 37 (5), pp. 547-59. I thank Dr. Louër for directing me to this reference during our fruitful discussion in October 2012.

<sup>35</sup> Young, *op. cit.* 1999, p. 4.

A decade later these unskilled jobs have become the almost exclusive preserve of Asian and African migrants.<sup>36</sup> Field studies show ethnic and national specialisation of tasks by branch of activity and within firms, with specific nationalities restricted to specific occupations,<sup>37</sup> and the clustering of workers of same sex and same origin.<sup>38</sup> This allows employers to delegate the task of disciplining (in the Foucauldian sense) to the foreigners themselves, who enforce norms, statuses and hierarchies partly inspired by their milieu of origin. Besides facilitating social control, this strategy of splitting the labour market encourages a global downward spiralling of salaries on the national market, because Lebanese labour laws do not govern migrant workers' unskilled services: they rarely reach the minimum wage set by the law and are often not registered in the social security system.<sup>39</sup>

For most migrants, the result of the segmentation of the labour market is the extreme insecurity and even destitution of a large majority of them. Only a skilled minority makes its way into the regular job market. Although studies are rare and most of them deal with the situation of domestic workers<sup>40</sup> there is, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, a recent concern among burgeoning NGOs and in the civil confessional and trans-confessional society for the (il)legal treatment they undergo from state authorities (especially from the Ministries of Interior and Justice) and employers' organisations. Their lack of social and health protection, their often appalling housing conditions, their dreadful working conditions (ten hours a day, six days a week or more) and the meanness of their "salary" a part of which often remains in the hands of employers and middlemen are not new issues.<sup>41</sup> However, they have only recently begun to draw public attention in relation to considerations on the meaning of democracy in Lebanon in comparison with neighbouring countries. In fact,

---

<sup>36</sup> Ahmad Dirani, al-Marsad al-Lubnani li-huquq al-'ummal wal-muwadhdhafin, *interview* 13 March 2013.

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem. At *Haytham*, the oil company which belongs to the Shiite foundation *Mabarrat*, the Lebanese are employed to deliver gas and Asians for car wash.

<sup>38</sup> Elisabeth Longuenesse, Paul Tabar, unpublished preliminary research in food plants and cleaning firms in the Beirut district, February and March 2013.

<sup>39</sup> The Lebanese Salaire Minimum Interprofessionnel de Croissance (SMIC) was raised to \$ 450 per month in January 2012.

<sup>40</sup> Nayla Moukarbel, 2009, *Sri Lankan housemaids in Lebanon*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press; Kathleen Hamill, 2011, *Trafficking of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon*, Kafa, <http://www.kafa.org.lb/StudiesPublicationPDF/PRpdf37.pdf> accessed 25 January 2014.

<sup>41</sup> UNDP, 1997, *A profile of sustainable human development in Lebanon*, part III D. [http://www.lb.undp.org/content/lebanon/en/home/library/democratic\\_governance/the-report--a-profile-of-sustainable-human-development-in-lebano.html](http://www.lb.undp.org/content/lebanon/en/home/library/democratic_governance/the-report--a-profile-of-sustainable-human-development-in-lebano.html) accessed 25 January 2014.

media campaigns and festive demonstrations against xenophobia have mobilized a new generation of militants sharing a common alienation from Lebanon's traditional prejudices and political leadership.<sup>42</sup>

Still, as underlined by all interviewees, nothing, or nearly nothing, of this has mobilized Lebanese labour unions.<sup>43</sup> Rather, the GCLW is "naturally" inclined towards protecting Lebanese workers against lower-priced migrant competition.<sup>44</sup> Union leaderships "advocate for the rights of the Lebanese workers before the government in order to regulate the flow of migrant workers and preserve them from the migrant labour competition."<sup>45</sup> They refuse to get involved in the support of foreign workers and the protest against their legally organised insecurity.<sup>46</sup> In return, less than 1 percent of non-Lebanese toilers join unions although they are legally entitled to become simple (i.e. non-voting non-eligible) members.<sup>47</sup> While the labour association was among the main actors of the political scene before 1975 when it enjoyed the support of powerful leftist parties, it is now shattered and weakened by a deadly sectarian competition. The GCLW went as far as ruling out the salary rises and other measures in favour of the working class proposed by Minister Nahas in 2012, in order to please its powerful political patrons, so fighting for the rights of migrant workers would be a far more remote objective. Yet, the exclusion of foreigners from the benefits of public welfare has several lopsided effects on the domestic labour market besides its harmful effects on the migrant market. It raises the domestic unemployment rate as it excludes from unskilled Lebanese workers from the labour market since they are not likely to accept the same terms as foreigners as they (unlike most foreign workers) have to pay rent and other expenses and want to be covered by social security. In the long run, the recourse to cheaper labour does not translate into tangible economic and social benefits for Lebanese citizens

---

<sup>42</sup> Telling examples are the 2012 antidiscrimination internet campaign *Shayef halek?* ("Can you see yourself?") <http://www.cheyef7alak.com/> accessed 25 January 2014 and the Jadaliyya video, 2012, *Racism and segregation at the Lebanese beaches*, [http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/6430/racism-and-segregation-at-lebanese-beaches-\(video\)](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/6430/racism-and-segregation-at-lebanese-beaches-(video)) accessed 25 January 2014.

<sup>43</sup> I was told of an attempt by the Progressive Socialist Party (led by Druze chief Walid Junblatt) to raise the issue; of a failed joint mobilization of Lebanese drivers and foreign cleaners at Sukleen in downtown Beirut during Muhammad Fneish's ministry (July 2008 – Nov 2009); and of a recent joint strike in an Ouza'i factory.

<sup>44</sup> Young, p. 52.

<sup>45</sup> Sensenig-Dabbous, Hourani, *op.cit.* p. 40.

<sup>46</sup> Ahmad Dirani, 10 March 2013.

<sup>47</sup> Youssef Harb, head of the Textile and Leather branch in FENASOL, *interview*, 14 March 2013.

since their salary remains low while the employment of cheap foreign labour is not reflected in lower prices.<sup>48</sup>

### **Tacit and active complicity in a “mafia-style” networking**

Migrant workers are the main losers in the current Lebanese process of deregulation of the labour market and the general paralysis of social movements, as confirmed by every study on their living conditions and net financial gains after reimbursing expenses for recruitment, travel, accommodation and sometimes residence and work permit.<sup>49</sup> Like the Lebanese workers and unions, but for other reasons, they are tacit participants in a global economy of labour substitution for the sake of entrepreneurs and managers. The threat of physical and symbolic violence plays a major role in their acquiescence as an overwhelming majority remains ‘illegal’ both in terms of residence and/or of work (an interviewee spoke of 75 percent of workers working illegally in the construction sector) and very frequently deprived of their passports, while unchecked xenophobic attacks make victims among them every week. Nevertheless, Asian and African foreign workers are more numerous every year in Lebanon where the economy of manpower importation is flourishing.

A full study of this economy would require minute concrete observations of the numerous agents involved in the process beyond critics of the modern world-system and humanitarian stances. As Mark Granovetter has observed, each of these agents takes part in a transnational network made of a “chain of small scale interactions.”<sup>50</sup> Families, churches, unions and associations, local authorities and national officials, especially embassies, police and immigration service officials, employment agencies in the sending and receiving countries, brokers, travel agencies, smugglers, traffickers and even NGOs, not to mention the workers and employers themselves... each of them shares in the formation and operating of powerful transnational networks whose benefits s/he pursues for his/her own

---

<sup>48</sup> UNDP 1997, part III D.

<sup>49</sup> Most of the migrants finance their trip by raising resources through family sources, mortgaging/selling their property including house/land, taking loans at very high rates of interest or a combination of these. Seema Gaur, 2010, “ Indian Labor Migrants in Lebanon: A Comparative Study of Migrants from Punjab and Tamil Nadu,” Washington, D. C., *The Middle East Institute*, <http://www.mei.edu/content/indian-labor-migrants-lebanon-comparative-study-migrants-punjab-and-tamil-nadu> accessed 25 January 2014.

<sup>50</sup> Mark Granovetter, 1973, “The strength of weak ties,” *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (6), pp. 1360-80.

sake.<sup>51</sup> Informality and illegality are the key characteristics of the functioning of these trans-boundary networks that escape international regulation. In the case of Lebanon, they also escape loose national regulation because the state is fragmented, weak, and dominated by private interests.

A leading Lebanese political actor considers the system organising the inclusion of foreign workforce in the Lebanese economy as a “mafia-style network.”<sup>52</sup> Indeed, what is occurring today in and around Lebanon fits the model discussed by Kyle and Koslowski: “Tacit and active complicity is required by a range of people in the sending and destination regions... Smugglers and traffickers ... are deeply integrated into the social fabric of indigenous settings... and are facilitated by a loose network of recruiters, middlemen, actual smugglers, local and foreign financiers, and government officials and police...”<sup>53</sup> Following their hypotheses I will now discuss the three main features that characterize the foreign labour market in Lebanon: privatization, commodification, and de-territorialisation.

First, the logic of the free market imposes itself over any other consideration along the chain of migration and foreign employment, all the more so in Lebanon where traditional *laissez-faire* policies were further fostered in the 1990s and 2000s reconstruction period. Better known in the Gulf countries, the sponsorship (*kafala*) system governs the foreign worker market in Lebanon as well as in other Arab countries such as Syria, Jordan and Israel. It allows the externalization by the state of an important part of the control over the migrants in favour of employers and recruiters, and consequently “embodies the importance of private actors in migration management.”<sup>54</sup> In the Lebanon of the 2010s, where political paralysis freezes the adoption of the yearly national budget and blocks decisions about structural reform there is hardly any national economic policy beyond the priority given to the banking and real estate sectors, even less an immigration policy beyond the rejection of Palestinian *tawtin* and the Syrian presence. Therefore, the decision to recruit foreign

---

<sup>51</sup> N. M. Shah, 1995, “Emigration dynamics from and within South Asia,” *International Migration* 33 (3/4), pp. 559-625.

<sup>52</sup> « Un maillage mafieux », interview, March 2013. ILO officers disagreed with the formulation.

<sup>53</sup> David Kyle, Rey Koslowski, 2011, “Introduction,” in D. Kyle, R. Koslowski (eds.), *Global human smuggling: Comparative perspectives*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 1-7.

<sup>54</sup> Mehran Kamrava, Zahra Babar (eds.), 2011, *Migrant Labour in the Gulf*. Working group summary report, Doha, Center for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar, <http://www12.georgetown.edu/sfs/qatar/cirs/migrantlaborsummaryreport.pdf> accessed 25 January 2014.



manpower in branches of activity such as agriculture, services and small industries does not depend on the existence of national manpower in these sectors nor does it respond to a national scheme to develop them. Rather, it depends on the comparative advantage offered by foreign toilers over nationals from the point of view of individual entrepreneurs.

Although national labour laws apply in principle to migrants also<sup>55</sup> the employer and/or broker (*kafil*) imposes all kinds of unfair terms of working conditions, wages and limits of mobility (end of contract; holding of passport ...) on their foreign employees. He/she possibly avoids legal duties by outsourcing workforce i.e. turning to interim and importing agencies—thus gaining a comfortable margin of freedom and benefit; the same margin is withheld from his employees.



28 April 2013. Migrant workers rally in Beirut, demanding an end to the current sponsorship system in Lebanon (Photo Sabah Haider)<sup>56</sup>

<sup>55</sup> The Lebanese Labour code (1946, amended in 1993) applies to foreign workers except in agriculture and domestic employment. Foreign workers are entitled to receive health coverage during the period of their contract.

<sup>56</sup> According to a *Kafa* official, abolishing the kafala system in Lebanon would help employers as well: "The relationship should be of an employer and an employee protected under labor law that ensures

Inevitably, the privatization of the foreign labour market opens the way to informality and illegality in the status, activities, wages and movement of immigrants.<sup>57</sup> Administrative controls are rare and hindered by powerful political bosses, and employers feel free to impose their terms on workers who mostly do not read Arabic and urgently need a salary. In return, a large proportion of imported workers quit their jobs before the end of their contracts in order to escape severe working conditions and heavy reimbursement charges. Many stay in Lebanon and find another wild contract in another company or work free-lance as they cannot get hold on their passport until they reimburse their *kafil*. Also, in order to alleviate the payment of sojourn and work permits, import agencies (Lebanese *makatib al-'amal*) recruit unskilled immigrants for domestic or cleaning work and send them as full workers in remote industrial areas in the North or the Beqaa valley.<sup>58</sup> As mentioned earlier, around two thirds of the foreign workers participating in the Lebanese economy work in the informal sector. The cost for individual workers in terms of health and retirement pensions is immeasurable. It is also heavy for the Lebanese state in terms of tax evasion. Besides, it raises issues of national security, since the Security Directorate lacks the means to monitor the composition and size of the current populations living in the country and the internal security forces and police are not prepared to guarantee their safety when they are confronted with deep racial prejudices. If one considers the logic of the government, and the security aspect of the management of the population, the question of who is a foreigner becomes primordial in the end.<sup>59</sup> It adds to the existing population segmentation and threatens the social pact between state and society. I will examine how this process of privatization affects the national identity of Lebanon In the third part.

---

a minimum wage and better insurance and working hours for the workers. Abolishing the Kefala system would enable both parties to end their relationship without a penalty."

<http://womensenews.org/story/labor/130430/workers-day-in-lebanon-targets-kefala-system#.UYt377Umsm9> accessed 25 January 2014.

<sup>57</sup> Julien Bret, 2007, *Circulation transnationale et travail disqualifié au Moyen-Orient. Les travailleurs non-arabes au Liban*, *Hommes et Migrations* n° 1266, pp. 96-107 ; Binod Khadria, 2009, *India Migration report 2009: Past, present and the future outlook*, New Delhi, Cambridge University Press.

<sup>58</sup> Youssef Harb, head of the Textile and Leather branch in FENASOL, *interview*, 14 March 2013.

<sup>59</sup> This idea is borrowed from Françoise Mengin, 2008, "Taiwan as the Westphalian Society's Foucauldian Heterotopia", *Sociétés Politiques Comparées* 5, p. 16.

Secondly, the Lebanese situation suggests that, rather being the result of negotiations and deals between migrant workers with their social capital, and local production managers with their economic rationale, migrant employment is a fluid and uncontrolled process. Myriads of “exogenous” key actors interfering at every juncture of the migration network are the decisive actors in international labour migration.<sup>60</sup> These intermediaries of all sorts govern the migration network; they turn foreign manpower into a commodity and manpower import into a trade. They extract value from migrants as well as businessmen and share the profit of this commercialization between themselves.<sup>61</sup>

Private employment agencies may not be the most powerful agents along the network but they are certainly pivotal. While thousands of kilometres apart, recruiting offices in the sending country and placement offices in Lebanon can be considered “two sides of the same coin.”<sup>62</sup> A main asset of their business is the bulk of information these agents master along the network and do not share with their “clients” – both employers and employees – in order to beguile them.<sup>63</sup> Here again migrant trade operates on the border of illegality either because legislation is complex (for example migrant workers who wish to regularize their residence situation by paying taxes to the Ministry of Interior cannot do so without jeopardizing their current situation); or it is incomplete (as neither minimum wage nor social security apply to foreigners according to Lebanese law); or because the authorities are unable/unwilling to enforce it: for example, migrant workers arriving in Lebanon see their passport confiscated by their *kafil*, although this discriminatory measure has been repeatedly condemned by the UN and fought by local human rights lawyers.<sup>64</sup>

The role played by political and social (sectarian and family) elites in enforcing, overseeing and cashing in on the foreign labour trade fits well with the traditional political economy of

---

<sup>60</sup> Fred Krissman, 2005, “Sin Coyote Ni Patrón: Why the “Migrant Network” Fails to Explain International Migration,” *International Migration Review* 39 (1), pp. 4-44. “Government officials and their agents, employers and their supervisors, moneylenders, smugglers, landlords, and even many neighbors, coworkers, and acquaintances are all exogenous to the Massey model. In addition, many of these actors participate in migration networks for reasons that have nothing to do with altruism; these networks function for more purposes than familial affection or mutual aid” (p. 25).

<sup>61</sup> N. M. Shah, 1995, “Emigration Dynamics from and within South Asia,” *International Migration* 33 (3/5), pp. 559-625.

<sup>62</sup> Samira Trad, interview, *Ruwwad*, 5 November 2012.

<sup>63</sup> Khadria, *op.cit.* p. 30.

<sup>64</sup> Gulnara Shahinian, UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, 2012, *Mission to Lebanon Report*, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G12/149/40/PDF/G1214940.pdf?OpenElement> accessed 25 January 2014.

the “Merchant Republic.” Until today, there has been no systematic study of the “collusive transactions”<sup>65</sup> linking political leaders to the business elite in order to facilitate the exploitation of foreign manpower at lowest cost. Yet, many observers agree that what they denounce in the domestic labour field as exploitation also takes place in the imported labour market, only in worse conditions. Sectarian and political leaders use their positions as lawmakers to facilitate administrative arrangements in favour of their business partners or for their own sake.<sup>66</sup> The burying of Minister of Labour Boutros Harb’s proposed legislation<sup>67</sup> in the parliamentary sands and the rejection of Minister of Labour Charbel Nahas’ aforementioned reform by Najib Miqati’s government are telling examples. The rationale behind such tactics is to raise entrepreneurs’ immediate profits in spite of the fact that “the reduction of production costs by employing cheap unskilled unmotivated manpower locks the structure of the economy into low productivity, low value-added jobs and low wages.”<sup>68</sup> While agencies and political leaders play a leading role in the labour trade, making profit by selling foreign manpower is tempting for every actor along the migration network in a context of neoliberal globalization, even for the migrant workers themselves. Obviously, in the short term, many migrant workers appreciate their freedom from monthly taxes and social security contributions, and are therefore prepared to choose illegal networks.<sup>69</sup> Here, the hiding or distortion of useful information by network operators plays a decisive role. A comparative study of Tamil and Punjabi workers in Lebanon showed that the former were mostly brought in by agencies on legal visas and were employed in the organized sector. While they were deprived of part of their wages, they migrated in relatively secure conditions. For their part many Punjabis had their migration arranged through a close family member already living in Lebanon. While such arrangement seemed to guarantee savings and security, early immigrants actually played the role of agents, obtaining sponsorship and

---

<sup>65</sup> Dobry, *op. cit.* p. 110.

<sup>66</sup> The struggle of Spinneys supermarkets’ employees against their manager in 2012 revealed that sectarian leaders from various regions had ownership of the land where the retailer’s branches were installed. Only a small minority of foreign workers was involved in the struggle, and there was hardly a mention of their particular fate in the press. See the reports in *al-Akhbar* from August 2012 to January 2013. Also Elisabeth Longuenesse and Paul Tabar’s unpublished field work (2013) shows that local political forces are able to impose quotas of national and sectarian groups in neighbouring factories.

<sup>67</sup> Marlin Dick, 11 February 2011, “Harb drafts laws to protect domestic workers”, *The Daily Star*.

<sup>68</sup> Kavar, Tzannatos, *op. cit.* pp. 6-7.

<sup>69</sup> According to IDAL (Investment Development Authority), employees’ contribution should be 2 percent of their monthly wage.

work permits from local employers and selling them to prospective migrants in the name of family and friendship ties.<sup>70</sup> In the end, if the Punjabis did better in Lebanon than the Tamils, it was thanks to the higher social capital that they had acquired before their departure from India. Their living conditions and financial gains were not improved, in fact the reverse, by their use of informal migration channels.

This leads to the third characteristic of the foreign labour market in Lebanon: The political economy of foreign employment has become de-territorialised, that is, operated by trans-boundary actors and regulated by transnational networks. While this is a common characteristic of unskilled labour migration around the world, the process has been facilitated in Lebanon over the last thirty years. Non-Arab Asian migrants entering Lebanon were able to by-pass state sovereignty thanks to the 'special relation' linking Lebanon to Syria. Moreover, in the recent period, migration agents also made extensive use of the internet to organise and protect their businesses. Both the recourse to a neighbour's soil and dealing through the Internet are indications of the de-territorialisation of the labour migration process.

Among illegal foreign workers, a telling number have entered Lebanon by crossing the land border between Syria and Lebanon.<sup>71</sup> Indeed traffickers in manpower were able to fly workers into Syria, since governments such as India had good relations and favourable customs agreements with the Ba'thist regime, allowing employment agencies to open branches in Damascus. Only on their arrival at Mezzeh airport would newcomers understand that Syria was not the end of their journey even when the company supposed to hire them had Syrian headquarters. This meant that many Asian migrants purchased their visas for Syria and most of their journey remained within a legal framework. Still, for the last part of their journey, they had to walk across the Syrian Lebanese border, led by local smugglers who relieved them of their last dollars and sometimes of their passports. Unlike the Syrian workers who were free to cross back and forth over the border under the condition of paying public taxes and private fees, Asian (and African) migrants entered the land of

---

<sup>70</sup> Gaur, *op. cit.* p. 6.

<sup>71</sup> This information is available in global studies (Young; Sensenig-Dabbous, Hourani) and was confirmed by an anonymous employee in *Caritas* interviewed in Jisr el-Basha on 14 March 2013.

illegality where they remained trapped until they became able to reimburse months and years of sojourn permit and the price of their passage.

It is necessary to point out that labour smugglers are generally far from the outlaws and other kinds of bandits imagined by state employees and international experts in distant offices. Before the Syrian uprising of 2011, passage across the Syrian Lebanese border was sponsored by Syrian *and* Lebanese top political leaders and military officers, and controlled by police and customs administrations from both states that taxed them on their way, as testified in most victims' narratives. In addition, it was not until relatively recently that most South Asian states had functioning embassies in Lebanon, with sections to care for expatriates' interests. Local "honorary consuls" were said to attend to their own financial business—even by participating in the immigration racket – rather than to the interests of the nation they were supposed to represent.<sup>72</sup> Even now, these embassies do not have the concrete means to check the delivery of work permits and migration movements of their nationals in Lebanon.<sup>73</sup>

Finally, the de-territorialisation of labour migration does not consist only of the capacity of trans-boundary actors to get around the rules and legal power on the ground. Increasingly, it consists of a dematerialisation of the migration network through electronic communication and the negotiating and striking of deals whose participants are as efficient as they are inaccessible. Typing "Asian workers for Lebanon" in to a web search engine leads to buoyant e-commerce websites with suggestive names, administered in China, Malaysia or elsewhere. Tens of companies often splintered between "mother" and "franchise" branches all over the Middle East and South Asia declare their business as "staffing for the construction and oil and gas industry" and "providing skilled and non-skilled workers along with caravans and their tools." Contacted by phone (their physical address was impossible to locate) "legal representatives" of employment agencies in Beirut were eager to promote themselves as graduates of Business departments at obscure American universities. They were willing to discuss deals such as "providing 40 unskilled Nepalese for a cleaning enterprise in Beirut" but soon retracted when understanding my inquiry was only academic. Although limited, my

---

<sup>72</sup> For example, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Ethiopia briefly forbade labour expatriation to Lebanon when they took direct charge of their interests in Beirut. For details see Young, *op.cit.*, pp.16-8.

<sup>73</sup> This led one of our interviewees to denounce the complicit and corrupt role paid by diplomats from the sending countries. Beirut, 20 March 2013.

probe into such a complex network suggests that transnational networks dealing with human labour are at the forefront of aggressive financial capitalism.

### **On the future of Lebanon's identity and sovereignty**

Besides the steadily growing labour immigration discussed in this chapter, Lebanon is experiencing an important emigration, especially of skilled manpower, which grew rather than decreased after the ceasefire in 1990. Experts estimate that more than half a million people emigrated from Lebanon between 1975 and 1995.<sup>74</sup> 40 percent of this emigration consisted of highly qualified young people,<sup>75</sup> as the rate of unemployment increased during the so-called reconstruction period, especially the unemployment of skilled workers, making universities a mere "export industry."<sup>76</sup> Mary Kawar comments on this trend by showing that "specific factors contributing to a low level of labour demand and skills include macroeconomic uncertainty, poor governance, corruption, and weak public infrastructure," thus locking the private sector "in a low productivity and low-wage equilibrium."<sup>77</sup>

To this day, the migration deficit of Lebanon has remained understated because the balance of remittances has stayed positive: Remittances from Lebanese abroad amounted to \$7.2 billion in 2009 (20 percent of GDP) while outward remittances flows were estimated at \$5.7 billion (17 percent of GDP).<sup>78</sup> Still, the human dimension is striking: the World Bank put the stock of emigrants at 664.1 thousands (15.6 percent of the population) for 2010 and the stock of immigrants at 758.2 thousands (17.8 percent).<sup>79</sup> Lebanon therefore became a labour

---

<sup>74</sup> Kamal Hamdane, 2000, "Assurer du travail pour le retour des personnes qualifiées," in 1996 Symposium at AUB on *The Return of qualified Lebanese migrants*, Beirut, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, p. 44

<sup>75</sup> Hassan Jouni, 2010, *La migration hautement qualifiée au Liban*, CARIM Report, [http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/13677/CARIM\\_ASN\\_2010\\_23.pdf?sequence=1](http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/13677/CARIM_ASN_2010_23.pdf?sequence=1) accessed 25 January 2014; Kawar, Tzannatos, *op. cit.* p. 9 (quoting a 2011 WB report): « Lebanon has the highest emigration and skilled emigration in the Arab world."

<sup>76</sup> Central Administration of Statistics, 2007, *National survey of household living conditions 2004-5*, ch. 3 pp. 55-7, <http://www.bloggingbeirut.com/docs/chapter3.pdf> accessed 25 January 2014.

<sup>77</sup> Kawar, Tzannatos, *op. cit.* p. 6: "Specific factors contributing to a low level of labor demand and skills include macroeconomic uncertainty, poor governance, corruption, and weak public infrastructure."

<sup>78</sup> World Bank, 2011, *Migration and Remittances factbook 2011*, <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPROSPECTS/Resources/334934-1199807908806/Lebanon.pdf> accessed 25 January 2014.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, p. 159.

surplus economy at both ends; the duality in its workforce “consists on the one hand, of highly skilled job seekers who often emigrate and, on the other hand, of low-skilled job seekers who usually remain in the country and are employed at low wages.”<sup>80</sup>

An interesting and rarely noticed point in Kavar’s remarks concerns the changing identity of the workforce and the labour market in general. It is not only that foreign immigration overtook national emigration in the recent years. Kavar writes that “[migrant] low-skilled job seekers (...) usually remain in the country,” thus inducing a steady and significant change in the sociological composition of the local population. In Beirut as in Hong-Kong and in other big buoyant cities of Asia, foreign migrants have gained visibility in the public space, especially on Sundays when local families remain at home and socialise privately. In suburban districts such as Dora in Beirut it is common to see migrants out and about. Here, banks, restaurants and cafés, food markets, shopping malls, medical and social centres connect them to their fellow nationals and their home countries. At the same time they transform the urban landscape and reveal themselves as real and visible inhabitants of Lebanon. Assaf Dahdah’s fine anthropological study of non-Arab women migrants in Greater Beirut<sup>81</sup> shows how “in the context of high segregation and fragmentation that characterizes Beirut, [these migrants] contribute in the interstices of the legality and of the city to its ‘re-creation’ as a new figure of ‘citadinity’”. In the district where these migrants invent new forms of public space, local and global stakes interweave in a process of “glocalisation” and contribute at the same time to shape new Lebanese national stakes.

Indeed, identity tensions mixed with class tensions have grown along the visibility of foreign workers. The reverse face of the process of re-cosmopolitization of Beirut<sup>82</sup> is the spreading of xenophobic reactions and racist crimes that strike Syrians in particular but do not spare newcomers from Asia and Africa. Parallel with the splitting of the labour market, one can observe the spatial and social segmentation of the society, building an invisible barrier between the Lebanese and other inhabitants of Lebanon. As underlined by a majority of my interviewees, only new NGOs acting under the influence of sister-bodies in the politically

---

<sup>80</sup> Kavar, Tzannatos, *op. cit.* p. 4.

<sup>81</sup> Assaf Dahdah, 2012, *L’Art du faible. Les migrantes non arabes dans le Grand Beyrouth (Liban)*, Beirut, Presses de l’IFPO. For an English abstract see <http://www.ifporient.org/node/1169> accessed 25 January 2014.

<sup>82</sup> For a comparable example see William Berthomière, 2005, “The emergence of a cosmopolitan Tel Aviv,” *Migracijske i Etničke Teme* 21, pp. 243-53, <http://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00573832/> accessed 25 January 2014.



correct international civil society mobilize against exploitation and racism. True, they are more active on the Internet than on the ground. The state for its part remains inactive as it is dominated by powerful networks of interests that take advantage of the situation. As for workers' unions and leftist parties such as the LCP that should include migrants' rights in their current protest movement—if only for the sake of their own members—they have failed to overcome the dominant popular feeling that foreign workers are a threat to the domestic labour market. Like the state, they remain trapped in corporatist segmented mobilizations imposed by confessional leaders and business interests.

In spring 2013, growing tensions in Lebanese political life brought the government to a standstill after Najib Miqati's resignation (25 March 2013) and exposed the hollowness of the upcoming general election. The damaging effects of the military spill-over of the Syrian crisis in the Lebanese arena function as a self-fulfilling prophecy as Salafis and Hezbollahis engage deeper every day in support of each of the Syrian fighting camps. This dangerous drift cannot but convince public opinion of the failure of the official policy of "dissociation" promoted by President Sleiman.<sup>83</sup> For all varieties of Lebanese, Syria remains the key to all evils or solutions in Lebanon eight years after its military withdrawal. There are few observers and leaders who dare to acknowledge that the reason why the Syrian crisis exposes and shakes Lebanon more than other neighbouring countries such as Jordan and Turkey is to be found in Lebanon itself. Indeed, as this study has showed, Lebanon's vulnerability has to be understood in terms of domestic as much as external factors. It is related to the steady but hardly noticed change in the identity of its society and polity during the past decades, especially after the end of the wars between 1975 and 1990 when migration issues increasingly transformed economic trends, social stakes and finally the national political order.

On the issues of employment, the reining in of foreign manpower and dealing with foreign workers, the Syrian crisis is crucial—probably more crucial than the situation of the Palestinian refugees. Indeed the crossing of the border by Syrian businesses and financiers in

---

<sup>83</sup> International Crisis Group, *Report 141*, 13 May 2013, "Too Close for Comfort: Syrians in Lebanon", p. 30.

the wake of the 1963 Ba'thist coup,<sup>84</sup> the massive and unruly participation of Syrian unskilled workers in national production since the 1990s,<sup>85</sup> and the recent arrival of several hundred thousand Syrian refugees in Lebanon fed negative representations, impacted the strategies of economic actors and shaped state policy toward immigration. In this respect, the tense relation between Lebanese and Syrian workers on the labour market offers a dominant pattern for the treatment reserved for migrants of other origins notwithstanding the fact that their numbers and needs make the Syrians threatening competitors in a depressed labour market.

Beyond renewing the social question in Lebanon, the migrant phenomenon contributes to the renewal of the national question because "immigration constitutes the limit of what constitutes the national state... Immigration [...] reveals in broad light the hidden truth and the deepest foundations of the social and political order we describe as national."<sup>86</sup> A study of this question in Lebanon is beyond the scope of this chapter on migrant labour, workers' mobilization and their failed cooperation. Yet a cluster of legal debates concerning the acquisition of Lebanese citizenship (to descendants of emigrants, to children of Lebanese women married to foreigners ...) and political controversies on naturalization—especially after the 1994 decree<sup>87</sup>—underlines a slow but deep change in the composition of the population living in the country. The often-discussed confessional dimension in this change (namely the diminishing role of the Christian communities) combines with a crude socio-economic dimension (the issue of poverty<sup>88</sup>) which the Lebanese authorities often prefer to acknowledge in terms of ethnicity (Arab vs. non-Arabs). They nurture the illusion of the temporary sojourn of migrants (and the future return of émigrés) in order to justify discriminatory policies of non-integration. Their short-sightedness conveys a defensive

---

<sup>84</sup> Elizabeth Picard, 2006, "Managing identities among expatriate businessmen across the Syrian-Lebanese boundary," in Inga Brandel (ed.), *State Frontiers, Borders and Boundaries in the Middle East*, London, I. B. Tauris, pp. 75-100.

<sup>85</sup> John Chalcraft, *op. cit.*, note 31.

<sup>86</sup> Abdelmalk Sayad, 2010 (1984), "Immigration and 'State Thought'" in Marco Martiniello, Jan Rath (eds.) *Selected Studies in International Migration and Immigrant Incorporation*, p. 166.

<sup>87</sup> Guita Hourani, "The 1994 Naturalisation decree," <http://eudo-citizenship.eu/docs/LEB-1994NaturalizationDecree-GuitaHouraniNov2011.pdf> accessed 25 January 2014.

<sup>88</sup> Heba Laithy, Khalid Abu-Ismaïl, Kamal Hamdan, 2008, *Poverty, Growth and Income Distribution in Lebanon*, International Poverty Centre Country Study 13, <http://www.ipc-undp.org/pub/IPCCountryStudy13.pdf> accessed 25 January 2014.

awareness of national identity because in Lebanon, as in the Gulf countries, “the migrants are the foil in relation to which the nationals perceive and define themselves.”<sup>89</sup> Growingly concerned with their future, Lebanese workers use migrants as scapegoats rather than allies in their struggle against elusive trade networks.

---

<sup>89</sup> Anh Nga Longva, *op.cit.* p. 184.